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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000312

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#) [YI](#)
SUBJECT: KOSOVO: BELGRADE EAGER TO DISCUSS STATUS

Classified By: Ambassador Michael C. Polt, (Reasons 1.4 B&D)

SUMMARY

1.(C) In meetings with official USG visitors on 2/24, and in remarks before an extraordinary parliamentary session on 2/27, members of the Serbian negotiation team for Kosovo status signaled their desire to open up a political track to negotiate Kosovo's status in direct discussions with Albanian interlocutors. The political track would begin before the end of-- and run parallel to-- the current expert-level negotiations on decentralization and other issues which affect the quality of life of the Serbian minority in Kosovo. The Serbian parliament unanimously endorsed a report on the Vienna meeting paving the way for the continuation of talks. END SUMMARY.

HAPPY WITH THE DECENTRALIZATION TRACK, BUT . . .

2.(C) Upon their return from the 2/21-2/22 meetings in Vienna on Kosovo decentralization, chief Serbian negotiators Slobodan Samardzic from the Prime Minister's office and Leon Kojen from the President's office gave positive assessments of the dialogue in meetings with EUR/SCE Director Charles English and U.S. liaison to the Ahtisaari team, Jeff Hovenier. Kojen said he thought the chairman's statement presented at the end of the two-day session was "surprisingly well balanced", and implied that Rohan had exaggerated--to the benefit of the Serbs--the degree of agreement on several issues. Both Kojen and Samardzic expressed a certain level of frustration at the slow pace of the status negotiations, and said they would have preferred to continue the discussion sooner than 3/17, as is currently planned. They also expressed skepticism that a negotiated agreement would be implemented. Samardzic called it, "just a paper", and said, that when it comes to putting the agreement into practice, "the Albanians won't give anything."

PUSHING THE STATUS ENDGAME

3.(C) Samardzic and Kojen both said it was time to open a "political" direct dialogue on the status question itself. Samardzic pushed for the political talks to run parallel to the newly-opened "expert" dialogue on decentralization and other issues. Noting the Contact Group's recent message that the talks should be completed by the end of 2006, and referring to the terms of reference that Status Envoy Martti Ahtisaari had shared with them, Samardzic said that the "main purpose of the talks should be to discuss status with the Albanians in front of a mediator." He asked for U.S. support for beginning such a discussion, at the same time stressing that he understood there would be no control

of Pristina from Belgrade, and that the Serbian side was ready to ask the Albanian side in direct discussions, "what do you want?". Kojen seemed less inclined to open the political track immediately, suggesting that it should come somewhere in the middle of the expert-level process on decentralization, in order to build on the common ground that would be developed during the course of the talks. "Realistically," said Kojen, "it needn't be too far away."

4.(C) Kojen emphasized he believes the parallel political track is important as a mechanism to force the Albanian side to make progress on decentralization, since after the private messages by the U.S. and the U.K. that the outcome would be independence, there was no reason for the Albanian side to go any further in the dialogue. Kojen acknowledged the importance of expanding the decentralization discussion into other topics that affect the Serb minority, such as protection of cultural monuments and property rights, and other "incentives" for the Serb minority. However, Kojen said that many of these other issues were intrinsically linked to status, since the Serb minority would likely immediately leave Kosovo if it became independent.

PARLIAMENTARY SESSION ACCEPTS REPORT

5.(U) PM Kostunica echoed the same theme in his 2/27 remarks before a special session of parliament called to hear the report of Samardzic and Kojen on the Vienna talks. In his address, Kostunica said the talks have two aims: the preservation of Kosovo within Serbian borders and preservation of Serbian people within Kosovo. He took pains to distinguish talks on decentralization-- as well as talks on cultural heritage, property rights, and privatization-- from the "actual talks" on Kosovo status,

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"which have not yet begun", and proclaimed that "we are ready for the immediate beginning of the Kosovo status talks". In calling for an immediate discussion of status, the Prime Minister appealed to Ahtisaari and the Contact Group to organize the talks, "with the belief that a compromise solution is attainable, because only a compromise solution can be a real and lasting one." At the end of the session, the parliament unanimously adopted the report of the negotiating team, paving the way for the continuation of negotiations.

COMMENT

6.(C) In light of what it perceives as public disagreements within the Contact Group, Belgrade may be testing how far it can challenge the U.S./E.U./U.K./Ahtisaari private message that the outcome of the talks will inevitably be independence. They see a separate political track to discuss status as their best hope of doing this, and of showing the Serbian people they are making a real effort. We are likely to hear more calls for a status track as the talks continue. END COMMENT.

17. (U) This message is releasable in its entirety to Mr. Ahtisaari.
POLT